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ABSTRACT

The careers, lives, and work habits of successful individuals were examined to identify factors that might explain their success. Each researcher selected one successful individual to interview. The researchers attempted to select a diverse group of interviewees from the general population, taking special effort to include females and nonwhites. The interview protocol contained 21 questions that were based on Walberg's Theory of Educational Productivity model. Nine of the 10 participants reported encountering a variety of obstacles in the following categories throughout their careers: problems caused by people; personal limitations; financial problems; and job instability. The individual interviewees provided a wide variety of answers when asked about what they were most proud of in their field of expertise, the things to which they attributed their career satisfaction and their success, their methods of sustaining a productive environment, and their sources of inspiration outside work. The interviewees' diverse responses were taken as evidence of the need for educators to take the following actions: (1) recognize and remove the social and institutional obstacles of racism that continue to exist for minority students; (2) focus on increasing students' confidence levels; and (3) help students learn to maintain a balance between school and life outside school and, eventually, between work and life outside work. (Contains 9 references.) (MN)

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Career, Life, Work Habits, & Insights of Successful Lives

Lusa Lo and Michael Eliot

Purpose

The purpose of this section is to explore and describe commonalities in the career, life, and work habits of successful individuals that may help explain their success. The researchers will describe the achievements of these individuals in obtaining levels of eminence beyond those of the norm, the obstacles that have stood in their way, and the purposeful activities they employ to reach and maintain these successes. They will note the relationships of these successes to Walberg's Theory of Educational Productivity (Walberg, 1984) in an attempt to find possible connections to their pasts that made these individuals successful. The literature describes differences in obstacles and expectations among gender and racial groups with regards to success. The researchers will compare these differences with those perceived or experienced by the interviewees. Parents, mentors, and educators may find such knowledge useful in avoiding pitfalls while developing expectations, advice, methods, and curriculum that spur children to explore their talents, abilities, and creativity, and to reach higher goals.

Background and Model

Studies have shown that individual gifts, talents, and interests must be fostered in the achievement of eminence (Albert, 1994; Delcourt, 1994; Filippeli and Walberg, 1997; Kitano, 1998; Subotnik & Arnold, 1996). Additional studies have shown that social background, status, race, and gender all present significant obstacles to this achievement (Basu, 1996; Kastberg & Miller, 1996; Kitano, 1998; Reis, Callhan, and Goldsmith, 1996). To understand the factors that lead up to success in life, the researchers found it necessary to explore both the positive influences and the barriers overcome by individuals described in this literature. They found common themes that include the early recognition of cognitive abilities, creativity, and talents by parents, teachers, and mentors; the development of strengths that these individuals use to overcome obstacles; and the

sacrifices made by individuals who acquire eminence. These works often conclude that understanding the efforts that accompany successes, not only by successful people, but by those with influence them, may be a key to improving the ways children learn and develop their abilities.

To better understand what factors increase the probability for success, the researchers chose to interview a number of successful people. They used Walberg's Educational Productivity Model (Walberg, 1984) as a framework for this study. It was synthesized from his research on thousands of studies related to students and achievement and precipitated by a downturn in American educational quality during the 1970s and 80's. He found nine salient factors in three areas that were shown to affect student productivity and learning. The area of student aptitude includes ability, development, and motivation; instruction includes amount and quality; and environment includes home, classroom, peers, and television watching.

Methodology

As a precursor to the actual research, the researchers developed a working definition of "success" from their own backgrounds.

Success – Eminent, Outstanding, Extraordinary, Resilient, Gifted, Talented. Describes a person who has the ability to rise above ones circumstances, to achieve ones goals, and is passionate and focused. A professional who has an outstanding record in ones chosen field.

Each of the 10 researchers then selected one individual to interview. They selected interviewees from the general population, with the limitation that these individuals must exhibit success as defined by the working definition. In addition, the researchers attempted to locate a diverse variety of interviewees. They especially chose females and non-whites, primarily because the literature described high degrees of adversity and challenges overcome by successful individuals in these groups. Another limitation was that the individuals chosen must be located and interviewed within a two-week period beginning June 1 and ending June 14, 2002. Because of these limitations,

most researchers selected interviewees they knew personally or through mutual acquaintances.

The researchers chose the personal interview method to gather information because of its unique ability to capture not only responses, but also the emotional expression related to these responses. Through the conversation of a personal interview, the researcher can quickly develop a working relationship with the respondent that garners trust and elicits responses that may not be forthcoming in less personal questioning formats. In addition, the researcher can probe the interviewee's responses to gain more depth and insight. Finally, the researcher can rephrase questions when the respondent provides inappropriate answers that indicate misunderstanding of the questions. All interviews were videotaped and audio recorded for the purposes of review and clarification.

Using the Walberg's productivity model, the researchers developed an interview protocol of 21 questions in 5 categories meant to elicit responses that would explore many of his 9 factors that influence learning. The categories include Career and Life, Work Habits and Insights, Life Productivity and Childhood Experiences – Aptitude, Success and Education, and Wrapping Up. The questions and additional spontaneous probes used during the interviews explored Walberg's factors and their possible relationships to the lives and experiences of the interviewees. The following are some sample interview questions.

What are you most proud of in your field of expertise?

What obstacles have you encountered in your career?

How would you define success?

How do you maintain an environment of productivity for yourself?

What do you do for inspiration outside of your work?

Upon completion of the interviews, the researchers transcribed them, dividing them into 5 segments that related to the 5 categories in the interview protocol. Pairs of researchers individually performed traditional content analyses of all transcript segments in a category. Then each pair compared and combined their individual analyses to

increase the reliability of these analyses. The combined analysis of each category of responses provided words and phrases that were agreed upon by both researchers as being representative of the response portions that answered the interview questions.

Findings

Results of the content analyses are organized in terms of the questions researchers developed for the interview. Questions focused on the participants' career and life and work habits and insights. For career and life, participants were asked to describe what they are most proud of in their field of expertise and the obstacles that they have encountered in their career life. In order to find out how they have become so successful, 3 questions on their work habits and insights were asked. Participants were asked to define what "success" is, how they sustain a productive environment for themselves, and describe the things that inspire them outside of their work.

Obstacles

Based on all 10 participant responses, 9 participants reported that they encountered a variety of obstacles throughout their career. Only one participant, the entertainer, reported that she didn't face any obstacles in her career. The obstacles that the 9 participants encountered could be grouped in 4 categories: problems caused by people, personal limitations, financial, and job instability. Among these 4 categories, majority of the participants reported that problems caused by people and personal limitations were their major obstacles.

Problems caused by people. Five participants reported that working with people was definitely a challenge for them. It was interesting to find that the three educators participating in the study reported that others' beliefs and prejudice became hurdles in their career life.

"What I noticed in becoming a principal, is that in going around and looking at the site, you noticed that they were separated by color, by race, by ethnicity, often by economics and I began to wonder why it was that

certain teachers would always recommend students in a higher tract and other teachers would never recommend students in a higher track.”

“The biggest obstacles were having to deal with the racist attitudes of Anglo coworkers who did not believe students of color could actually learn. And my determination to prove them wrong.”

“But as far as carrying out my responsibilities, there are many obstacles, such as the perception of the public of public education. That’s an obstacle. Sometimes you have to deal with legislatures. Sometimes when you have to deal with the bureaucracy that gets in your way of what you want to do and what you have to do. To get the job done.”

Both the businesswoman and inventor also experienced difficulties managing and dealing with people during their career life.

Personal Limitations. Internal obstacles were also experienced by 3 of the participants. These participants felt that once they were clear about what they wanted to do, clear about their beliefs, or convinced themselves that they were capable of completing the job, they found themselves able to complete the task.

“Probably myself more than anything else. Maybe a hesitancy to do something because I’m not sure I’m going to do it well. ... Once I’ve taken care of myself in terms of convincing myself that’s the way to go.”

“From that standpoint I would say the obstacles are probably mostly internal rather than having been externally imposed on me.”

Financial and Job Instability. A few participants reported that financial problems and job instability were the obstacles in their career. The inventor reported that he did

encounter some financial difficulties. The hospital administrator reported that job instability was an obstacle for her. She stated that because of the hospital merger, her job position was unstable.

Career Satisfaction

When participants were asked about what they were most proud of in their field of expertise, their responses varied. Some participants were proud of what they were doing in their job, their achievement, the reputation they have built up in their career life, maintaining their own belief systems, and their own abilities to navigate through difficult situations and work with complex situations and people.

Definition of "Success"

The term "success" is a very interesting word. Everyone has a very different definition of success. Our participants are not exceptions. Among the participants' responses toward the definition of "success", they can be grouped in four categories: achieving goals, personal satisfaction, balance of life, and maintaining a stable home. Majority of the participants suggested that a person would be considered as successful when they were able to achieve their personal goals.

"I think success is being able to achieve something without the risk of losing your soul."

"Success is achieving personal goals. I think success is a process where there's a continuity of setting and achieving goals ... that's success."

"I define success for myself as something I have worked hard to do becomes a reality."

“I think success has to do with personal satisfaction, accomplish something that you have set out to accomplish.”

On the other hand, 2 participants believed that personal satisfaction was crucial in becoming successful. They believed that when a person was able to do what they wanted to do, that's success. Furthermore, two of the participants believed that maintaining a stable home for their family and having a balance of life were also crucial.

Methods of Sustaining a Productivity Environment

When participants were asked about their methods of sustaining a productivity environment for themselves, their responses varied. Each participant has a very different way of sustaining one's productivity environment, which was based on the course of one's work. It was interesting to find out that all the educators participating in the study have a very different ways to sustain their productivity environment. One mentioned that she needed to organize the things she needed to do daily. The more organized she could be, the more productive she felt. The other educators felt that living on their own beliefs, focusing on specific goals, and maintaining a healthy spousal relationship were crucial in sustaining their productivity environment. The 2 scientists also didn't agree on each other's method of supporting a productivity environment. While one believed that leading a disciplined life was important, the other believed that he needed to find new problems or challenges to deal with because he had a hard time doing something that he was not interested in.

Inspiration Outside of Work

Virtually all the participants in the study had many different kinds of inspiration outside of their work. Participating in organized groups, such as church, nonprofit organizations, and membership organizations, were considered to be an inspiration for 5 of the participants. The remaining 5 participants stated that family, money, the love of nature, and hobby have inspired them tremendously outside of their work.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study have several broad implications for educators. First, as educators and citizens, we must recognize and work to remove the social and institutional obstacles of racism that continue to exist for minority students. As the three educators participating in the study pointed out, public perceptions of education and the peoples' prejudices have continually existed and prevented many of our learners' successes. Second, educators are required to focus on increasing students' confidence levels. Many of our participants pointed out that major obstacles throughout their career lives were internal. Many of them stated that they had to frequently convince themselves that they were capable of completing the job. Once they overcame their fears, they found that they were able to complete their jobs. In other words, our students may also encounter such obstacles in their school and career life. In order to help the students avoid such obstacles, building their confidence and self-esteem both at school and home is essential. Third, maintaining a balance of life was one of the factors of helping our participants to be successful. Our participants did not just succeed in their careers, they also needed to be inspired from all kinds of things, such as participating in organizations or talking to someone with common interests or career background. Our students need to know that being successful in school is very important, but maintaining a fulfilling life is equally essential. As educators and parents, we need to encourage our students to participate in some out-of-school activities that inspire them and broaden their horizons.

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